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Thoughts for Lent



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THOUGHTS FOR LENT.

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THOUGHTS FOR LENT.

CHAPTER I.

THE OBJECT AND USE OF LENT.

OUR Church does well to call us aside, as it were, at this season, and give up a few weeks to a closer inquiry into the state of our souls, and a nearer approach to God. The world so enchains us, and its interests and occupations so engross us, that we need something to force itself upon us, so as to check us in our hurrying course, and induce us seriously to ask ourselves, 'Where am I? Whither am I going? Is my state right with God?'

Therefore I think our Church does well to

set apart this season as one of special discipline for her children, for the awakening of the careless, and for the deeper thoughtfulness and inward searching of her true members.

The history of Lent is this. It seems that some fixed period before the Festival of Easter has always been observed in the Christian Church. At one time the observance of it only lasted forty hours, to commemorate those hours of sadness, when our Lord, the Bridegroom of the Church, was taken from us and was laid in the grave, embracing therefore the period between His passion and resurrection, namely, the Friday and Saturday before Easter morning.

But afterwards the time was lengthened, and was extended to Forty Days. This was probably owing to the fact that Moses fasted forty days before receiving the law ; that Elias also, and the Ninevites kept the same period as a fast ; and, above all, that our Lord fasted forty days and forty nights in the wilderness

before He was exposed to Satan's temptation.

The custom of observing Lent prevailed in the Church up to the time of the Reformation. Several Christian bodies then ceased to observe it ; but the Church of England continued the practice, being fully persuaded of its great importance and usefulness ; and it still remains as a marked season in our Christian year.

But what is the chief object and purpose of Lent ? It has always been considered a time of more than ordinary strictness and devotion ; a time for acts of self-denial and humiliation before God ; for exercising more abundantly than usual every kind of charity ; for employing our spare time in visiting the sick and sorrowful, and engaging in some special work of mercy. And considering how carelessly we sometimes approach the table of the Lord, it may be looked upon as a time, above all others, for confession of sin and prayer, for fasting and watching ; so that we

may hope to come with a fuller preparation of heart to the Holy Supper of our Lord at Easter.

Now, my wish is to point out to you how you may be able to make the present season a really profitable one. I feel that among my readers there will be some who are honestly desirous to be helped on their way heavenward. Doubtless there are those who care for nothing of the kind ; but there are others, who, conscious of their own weakness and shortcomings, and convinced also of the blessedness of a truly Christian course, long to be set fair on their way to a holier and better life.

I would then begin by saying, Make the present Lent *a reality*; not looking upon it merely as a recognised ordinance, which comes before you in a dry and lifeless form, when public opinion makes a sort of compromise with the world, and is content that some of its wilder enjoyments should be suspended for a certain number of weeks, whilst

others less condemned, but perhaps equally frivolous, are allowed in their stead. But make it a real time of reckoning with God, and of forwarding the work of your own salvation.

Is it a season for special *Humiliation*? Then make it so for yourself. Humble yourself before God. When you think of days gone by, or when you consider the present state of your soul, you have need, great need, to be humbled. Fall down at God's footstool. Confess your sins to Him, not merely in a general way, but one by one. Try and bring them all out before Him. And while you acknowledge yourself to be a miserable sinner, let the chastened, humbled feeling of a miserable sinner be yours. Go to Christ with a penitent heart. Bow before His cross and say, 'Lord, Thou hast dealt graciously with many a sinner, deal so with me. A broken and a contrite heart Thou wilt not despise.'

Is Lent a time for *special Self-examination*?

Set about this duty in earnest. Probe your heart to the very quick. The process may be painful, but spare not yourself. It is desirable, yea needful, to know all. You must get to the very root of the disease, in order that the remedy may be applied.

Is Lent a time for *Prayer*, for unwonted earnestness in prayer, for a more stated giving up of ourselves to prayer than usual, for drawing nearer to God than common? Then say to yourself, I will, by God's help, make this Lent a time of greater devoutness. I will make some strict rule for praying oftener and more earnestly than I have heretofore done. I will set apart some one or two fixed hours in the day for special acts of devotion, to be for ten minutes alone with God, over and above my ordinary times of prayer.

And if an opportunity is given you of attending God's house in the week (be there a sermon, or no sermon), you will find that the moments you spend there will be hallowed moments; and whether you be a person of

leisure or immersed in business, the time thus gathered from the world will be anything but wasted time, if thus given to God.

Almsgiving is also another duty which Lent seems to suggest. Select some decidedly Christian object for your alms, and lay by during Lent what you consider to be a right sum to set apart. First offer it to God, and then give it cheerfully and heartily to those who are appointed to receive it. Make it a religious gift ; solemnly consecrate it to God, and devote it to His service.


Again, Lent is a season which our Church appoints for *Fasting*. Then let us at once ascertain what is required of us in this respect. What is said in Holy Scripture about it ? and what has been the practice of God's people ?

Prayer and Fasting are often coupled together in God's word. 'As for me,' says David in Ps. xxxv., 'I humbled my soul with fasting ; and my prayers returned into mine own bosom.' Daniel says, 'I set my face

unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting.' When our Lord's disciples failed to cast out an evil spirit from one who was grievously possessed, He told them, 'This kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.' We read in Acts, xiv. concerning the Apostles, that 'when they had ordained them elders in every Church,' they 'prayed with fasting.' And St. Paul recommends the Corinthians, under certain circumstances, to 'give themselves to fasting and prayer.'

Clearly then fasting was practised, in connexion with prayer, by the saints of old; and if it was needful for them, it must be so for us likewise.

It is true that our Lord does not enjoin it upon His disciples *as a necessity*; but He speaks of it as a duty that was clearly recognised. For instance, He says in Matt. ix., 'The days will come when the Bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they (the children of the bridechamber) fast.' And



on one great occasion He Himself fasted : and in Matt. vi. He speaks of it as a practice observed by His disciples ; ‘ And thou, when thou fastest.’

The teaching of the Apostles was like their Master’s : they did not actually command its observance, but still they recognised it, and certainly practised it themselves.

In after ages the same godly custom prevailed. We learn from Justin Martyr that fasting accompanied the administration of Baptism. In the second century it was usual to fast before Easter ; and Clement of Alexandria speaks of weekly fasts. It appears that in some Churches every Wednesday and Friday were considered as fast-days, on the ground that our Lord was betrayed on a Wednesday, and crucified on a Friday.

In more modern times we find that God’s holiest servants—such as Bishop Andrewes and Taylor, Henry Martyn and Brainerd, and others that I might mention—all

practised fasting as a religious act, which they found to be very helpful to their souls.

But this holy exercise, which is so profitable in itself, has been sadly perverted. Even in our Lord's day it seemed to Him to be necessary to guard His disciples against its abuse. 'Be not (He says) as the hypocrites, that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret.'

In after years it was necessary to utter the same warnings. Thus St. Chrysostom, in one of his Lent sermons, says, 'Let us set a guard upon our ears, our tongues, our minds, and not think that bare fasting is sufficient for our salvation. The true fast is abstinence from vices; for abstinence from meat was appointed that we should curb the tone of our flesh, and make the horse obedient to his rider. He that fasts ought, above all things, to bridle his anger, to learn meekness and clemency, to have a contrite

heart, to banish the thoughts of all inordinate desires. This is the true fast.'

In the present day too there is much false fasting: as, for instance, the mere abstaining from one kind of food, but indulging freely in another, and also the great error of regarding it as a meritorious act in the sight of God.

We should use fasting simply as an instrument for our good, as one of those spiritual weapons of our warfare which are mighty through God to the pulling down of the strongholds of Satan, and as a means of 'keeping under our body, and bringing it into subjection,' lest by our easy living we forget that we are wrestlers for a prize, and warring a mighty warfare. We should regard it as a means of self-discipline; and by thus mortifying our earthly members we should desire to detach ourselves from the world, and be anxious that God would manifest within us the powers of a new life, and would bring us into closer union with Himself.

As regards fasting then, I would say that the Gospel lays no positive necessity upon any one. If, from motives of health, or for any other sufficient cause, we see good reason for abandoning the idea, be it so ; and I trust that God will not be extreme to mark our omission. But if conscience tells us that we need it, and that it will assist us in our warfare against sin, and will help us in our heavenly journey, then let us not, at this season, neglect it. And surely God will assist us, if we honestly desire to do this or any other religious act in a right and prayerful spirit.

It may be well to say a word or two as to the difference between *Fasting* and *Abstinence*. To *fast*, in the strict meaning of the word, signifies to withhold from ourselves every kind of food for a time. To *abstain* means either to deny ourselves certain *kinds* of food, or to diminish the *quantity* which we usually indulge in.

Our Church seems to recommend either the

one or the other. Whether then we abstain from food altogether, or from some particular kind of food which is especially pleasing to us, we are exercising that self-denial which our Church desires to enforce upon us at this particular season. Again, if there is any kind of amusement in which we take great delight, to put away that amusement for a time would be a kind of fast, and an act both pleasing to God and good for our souls.

I have now shown you that Lent is a very marked season in the Christian year. Let *us* mark it in our own individual conduct — *outwardly*, by abstaining from that free and unrestrained intercourse with our fellow-men which we are permitted at other times to enjoy, by those acts of self-denial and self-discipline of which I have spoken, by a more frequent attendance in the house of God, and, if necessary, by putting ourselves to a little inconvenience in order to

be daily present at the services of His sanctuary; and still more by those *inward* acts of penitence, humiliation, meditation, and prayer, which God requires of us, and which our souls greatly need.

Thus will Lent leave its trace behind, and have a blessed influence upon the whole year.

And now it would grieve me if I thought that I had said anything to discourage one humble follower of Christ, or that I had imposed a burden too heavy for that soul to bear. But what I believe is, that both you and I need the help which Lent offers to us.

Religion is not a mere plaything that we may take up or put down at pleasure. It is not a science that we may argue about, a mere contest of opinion, to be spoken of controversially. It is a matter which affects our souls, a momentous concern, on which our well-being in eternity depends. And I believe that by following out the directions which I have suggested, we shall gain at

least a step or two towards a holier and more devoted life.

In recommending the due observance of Lent, objections will arise from two quarters. Some will say, the observance of Lent is not positively enjoined by Holy Scripture ; why then insist upon it ? I do so because our Church has wisely appointed it as a time of spiritual discipline and training for her children. And I feel that we all need some such pause in our Christian course—some such resting-place in our spiritual journey—in order to recover our strength, and get fresh grace to help us on our way.

Others again will dislike the subject being brought before them, for it seems to draw a curtain for a while over their joys, and to interfere with their day-dreams of happiness. The very approach of Lent is unwelcome to them ; and the more so, when their serious attention is called to its observance. They go away with their conscience somewhat uneasy, and their minds saddened.

Ah, my reader, it is well sometimes to be made uneasy. It is well to have our conscience stirred, our dreams broken in upon, and our even course a little ruffled. For is there not a voice which says, 'Woe to them that are at ease in Zion.'

Life is slipping away ; and you are making perhaps a great carnival of it, a time of enjoyment, whilst you are shutting your eyes it may be to the solemn realities of eternity. Lent is the very time for you. It comes with a voice of friendly warning. It comes as a messenger to your soul, saying, Where art thou ? Prepare to meet thy God. Trim thy lamp, lest when the Bridegroom comes thou be all unprepared to meet Him.

CHAPTER II.

WHAT IS SIN ?

AS we have especially to deal with our sins during this season of Lent, it is very important that we should clearly understand what *the Nature of Sin* is.

Let us proceed, then, to inquire, WHAT IS SIN? The World's account of it, and our own account of it, are very different from God's. The *World's* estimate of sin is a somewhat lenient one. It judges of it according to its own code; and it excuses many things which are positively wrong, because they do not interfere with that code. It speaks about human weakness, and error in judgment, and so forth, making the chief blame of sin to rest on these; and yet at the same time often judging very harshly

of an offender, and making but little allowance for the circumstances under which he offended. On the other hand, *our own* estimate of sin is often partial. We are very backward in condemning any thing on which our hearts are set ; and we are apt to look at right and wrong through a distorted medium, putting bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter.

But what is sin in *God's sight* ? for this is the real point. It is an act of rebellion against our heavenly Sovereign. It is every departure from the boundary line which He has set between right and wrong. It is the transgression of His law. It is whatever offends against His will.

There are many kinds of sin ; but each kind is hateful to God, and brings ruin upon the soul. There are different degrees of wrong, but every wrong thing is sinful before God, who is 'of purer eyes than to behold iniquity.' The standard which Christ raised was a high one, higher than man had ever

before placed it. 'Except your righteousness' (He said to His disciples) 'exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.' 'Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.' He speaks of a purity, like the snow resting upon some mountain-top, white in the blue holiness of heaven. And all that comes short of this bears the stamp of sin according to His righteous estimate.

The Roman Catholics divide sin into two classes, *mortal* and *venial*.

They hold that to be *mortal* or deadly sin, which is a wilful and direct transgression of some declared law of God; as for instance murder, theft, adultery, and the like; whereas *venial* or pardonable sin is that which is committed through carelessness or indulgence; such as speaking idle words, excess in eating, drinking, or sleeping.

But surely such a distinction is not warranted by the Word of God. For what sin is there which is not deadly in its nature, having within it the root of bitterness, and deserving the wrath of God? And what sin is there which, if repented of, is beyond the reach of pardon? We are told in Scripture but of one sin which cannot be forgiven, and that is, the sin against the Holy Ghost; not that there is any want of sufficiency in Christ's atonement, or in the pardoning mercy of God, but that those who commit it despise and reject the only remedy.

There is another distinction which we naturally speak of, for it is a very obvious one; namely, *outward* sin, and *secret* sin.

The former meets with a far heavier condemnation from man, whilst the latter, though it may never be found out in this world, may be equally heinous in God's sight, and in some cases even more heinous than the other.

A person commits robbery ; he is found out ; his crime is proved against him ; and he is most justly branded as a thief. Another robs, but it is secretly. He defrauds his neighbour by little and little. He stealthily overreaches his friend, who trusts him ; and perhaps all the while he is honoured by the world, and stands high in the social scale. So he may go on undetected, and even unsuspected ; and perhaps carries his ill-gotten wealth with him to the verge of the grave ; and yet what is he in reality but a thief and a robber ?

Again, one person breaks the Seventh Commandment ; he is tried in a court of justice, and his guilt is proved ; he is guilty, and counted as an adulterer. Whilst another commits the same sin in his heart ; his intention was the same ; his will, his desire was just as sinful ; only he lacked the opportunity.

Or, to take a third case. One man is an open opposer of religion. He speaks

boldly against Christ; he declares his disbelief in the message which God has sent. Another has a secret dislike to the gospel; he professes to believe in Christ, but in works he denies Him. He sneers at true earnestness, wherever he sees it, and throws a damper on every effort that is made to do God's work in the world.

Which is worst, the open infidel or the unbelieving professor? the violent opposer, or the hidden foe of Christ? The sin of the one is perhaps of as deep a dye as of the other. The latter, though less notorious than the former, is as guilty, and as far from the kingdom of heaven.

We sometimes hear too a distinction drawn between *great sins* and *little sins*; but there is no such distinction in reality; for though the world speaks of small sins, and winks at them, and though there are certain conventional sins which the laws of society allow, and even approve of, they are all

offensive to God, and He declares that 'all unrighteousness is sin.'

To mention a yet further distinction, there are sins of *omission* and sins of *commission*—duties that we have left undone, and positively wrong things that we have done. In most people's estimation the former is far less serious than the latter. They would shrink perhaps from doing a wicked *action*; and yet, without any scruple, they leave many duties undischarged, which as Christians they are bound to perform.

And will God take no note of our neglect? Were the Priest and the Levite guiltless, who saw their wounded brother lying helpless in the way, and passed by on the other side? Could they say of the man who had robbed him, and stripped him, and left him half dead, that he was the only guilty one?

Look at Matthew xxv., and see how the Lord will deal with us in the great Day of Reckoning. His charge against us will not

be for merely sins of commission. He will not be content to bring home to us positive crimes; 'I was hungry, and thirsty, and naked, and you made me so; I was sick, and you were the actual cause of my sickness; I was in prison, and you it was who fastened on my chains.' No, this will not be the charge, or at least the only charge. It will be that you have left *undone* what you should have done; 'I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink; I was naked, and ye clothed me not; sick and in prison, and ye visited me not.'

It is not merely this and that evil deed that is registered against us, but there is a long list also of what we *might* have done, but which we left neglected—such as wasted time; money spent upon ourselves; opportunities unimproved; the good words we *might* have spoken, but we were silent; the light we *might* have sent forth, but we hid it under a bushel; the aching hearts we

might have soothed and comforted ; the wayward ones we *might* have led right ; the souls we *might* have saved. Oh, these will add their weight to the dreadful burden of our sins.

Then there is yet another distinction we may make ; and that is, between sins *known* and *unknown* to ourselves.

Known sins are those for which our own conscience condemns us, or which others have brought home to us. But besides these, there are sins which we have carelessly and thoughtlessly committed, or which our own conscience was too dull to notice at the time ; for the consciences of some of us are so callous that we commit sin without feeling it to be sin ; they are so hardened that its sting does not make us smart ; it passes away without leaving any impression upon us ; we are as unconcerned as if we had not committed it.

And further, there are sins which, though

they awakened some little remorse at the moment, were soon forgotten, and have entirely become obliterated from our memories. Ah, there will be a reminder of them some day, and happy is it if that reminder comes in time for us to seek forgiveness. But sometimes, alas! our consciences are never roused, until it is too late to apply for a remedy in the atoning blood of Christ.

Indeed, it is enough to make us tremble to think not only of our known and remembered sins, but of those countless transgressions, which were committed years and years ago, but which are all still fresh in the Book of God's remembrance, although we may have utterly forgotten them.

I have endeavoured in this chapter to show you what sin is—not what it is in your eyes, or in the eyes of the world, but what it actually is, and how God regards it. He looks at it as a deadly, hateful thing. And whether our transgression be 'known and read of all

men,' or, as Job says, it be 'sealed up in a bag,' and be hidden from the gaze of men; whether it be committed openly or in secret; whether it be in the bud only, or full blown; in the intention merely or in the ripened act; whether it be known and remembered by us, or unknown and forgotten; it most assuredly separates us from God now, and may separate us for ever.

If we may draw a distinction between the heinousness of one sin and another, I would say that no sin is so utterly hateful to God as a sin that is committed against light and knowledge—the sin of one of God's own children—of one who knows what the evil of it is, and has tasted of true holiness.

It was this that aggravated Balaam's sin, for his eyes were open; and the sin also of Judas, for he was the familiar friend of Jesus, and yet he lifted up his heel against Him; and the sin too of St. Peter, for his denial was all the sadder, seeing that it came

from the lips of one who was the disciple and close companion of our Lord.

But we shall never estimate sin rightly, we shall never see it in its true deformity, unless God by His Holy Spirit shows it to us as it really is. One great work of the Holy Spirit is to 'convince the world of sin ;' and when He gains an entrance into our hearts, one of His first acts is to make us feel its true nature. Then it is, and not till then, that we shall see sin to be, as the Apostle says, 'exceeding sinful.' We shall grieve for having committed it. We shall hate it, as God hates it. And it will lie as an intolerable burden upon our souls, so that we shall never rest until it is removed.

And now I cannot close this part of my subject without reminding you that although sin is a hated thing in God's sight, and His anger is ever going out towards the offender, yet there is love in His heart ; 'there is forgiveness with Him ;' there is to the penitent

a way of escape from His wrath. Blessed be God for those words of mercy, which fell from His lips, 'I, even I, am he that blotteth out as a thick cloud thy transgressions, and as a cloud thy sins;' 'Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord; though your sins be as scarlet they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.'

When the Son of God was upon earth, He showed Himself to be 'holy, harmless, and separate from sinners.' He stood clothed in a righteousness that never faltered. And yet, all-pure as He was, He felt compassion ever for the impure. He yearned over the lost and ruined. Broken, contrite, aching hearts never turned in vain to Him. It is very remarkable that His goodness, instead of repelling men, drew them to Him. Generally speaking, the sinful shun the society and presence of good men, as foul birds shun the light. But in His case we find holiness attracting the sinful. Publicans and sinners

gathered round the Saviour. They crowded His steps, because they saw a hope opened out, in a hopeless world, for broken hearts and burdened souls. The world looked on them with scorn. It saw only a crust of sin hardened around them. But Jesus could look below the surface; and when He saw under that outer crust of sin some movement of the heart, some softening of the spirit, then He drew near to save. At the first cry for mercy His heart went out towards the penitent; and where sin abounded, there did grace much more abound.

Let us never forget that we have 'all sinned, and come short of the glory of God.' In this respect we are all alike. But what we want is to have it put away. Christ alone can do this for us. He has atoned for sin; and through Him we can obtain forgiveness.

When you have once discovered your sin then, do not trifle with it; do not play with it; do not encourage it even for an instant.

But fling it from you as an accursed thing.
Flee to the cross, and there sue for mercy ;
never leaving it until you feel the power of
Christ's atonement, and find acceptance for
His dear sake.

CHAPTER III.

CONVICTION OF SIN.

IF we could know the history of some hearts, we should be much struck with our discoveries concerning them. Or, if you and I could recall what has passed through our own minds in days gone by, the history would be deeply interesting. The constant inclination to walk in the path of evil, and the occasional interposition of God, pointing out to us a wiser and a better way; the desire to do right, and the temptation to do wrong; the powerful influence of God's love, and the constraining attraction of the world. All this would indeed make us wonder at ourselves, and fill us either with thankfulness or with shame.

Our histories would on the whole be very unlike one to the other, especially in the details. And yet in one or two features there would be a close resemblance. For instance, there would be discernible in all of us a dark trace of that evil which is a prevailing characteristic of our fallen nature. Then there would be also the same struggle against sin, though in some it would be fainter, and of shorter duration, than in others. With some too it would end in victory, and with others in a mournful defeat. In all, if I mistake not, there would be a record of God's interference (heeded or unheeded), striving with our souls, and calling us to Himself.

But I wish to dwell on one particular point in this Chapter, which perhaps has either had a place in our past history, or has now a place in our present experience—*Religious Conviction*. By this I mean an inward persuasion of the truth of God; a consciousness, if we have gone astray, that we are in the

wrong path, and an awakened desire to find the right one; an affecting sense of our guilt before God, and a longing to escape His wrath; a feeling wrought in us by the Holy Spirit that we need a Saviour, and are lost without Him. Such a conviction as this all have felt who are now in heaven; and many, alas! have felt it also who are now among the lost. It is an important movement towards a better life; but it often comes short of it. It is not repentance or conversion; but it sometimes leads to both. It is oftentimes the first step on the way to a changed and altered life; but oftener perhaps it is but a passing feeling which suddenly springs up, and as suddenly vanishes, leaving the soul in a worse state than it was in before.

I will suppose that, like many others, you have been brought up with certain spiritual advantages. Your early education has been leavened with more or less of religious culture. Your attendance at Public Worship has been

a thing of course. Your Parents have gone to the House of God, and you have gone with them. You have been taught to read your Bible, and to say your prayers. And it is well that you have been so taught; for though there may be a considerable amount of formality in these things, still the habit is a right one, and only needs a spiritual influence to make it a blessing to your soul.

Some persons, as they grow up, go on with seeming regularity and decorum. In their outward condition at least there is much that is Christian-like. But others are less under restraint. They are unwatchful, and are soon led astray; and ere long, it may be, they have been drawn into the commission of positive sin, and the life they now lead has become an irreligious and Godless one.

But in both cases the mind at times awakens up to thoughts of better things. The feeling comes over them that they are not right.

God seems to whisper to their souls, calling them, and urging them, to enter upon His service. Religion presents itself to them as a great reality, which they cannot at once thrust aside without wounding their conscience; and yet they feel that they have no part in it. They long, it may be, to live a holier life; and perhaps from time to time they resolve to do so.

This is what I mean by Religious Conviction. It may be felt in our youth, in our manhood, or in old age; but more often in the former than in the latter: for when the heart is young and fresh, then it is that it is open to better thoughts and yearnings. This conviction may be felt once or twice in our lives at certain marked seasons. Or we may feel it constantly: it may often be sounding the note of warning within us, like a watchman reminding us that the night is far spent, and the day is at hand.

And further, there may be nothing apparently supernatural about it: it may come

in the way of our ordinary experience. Or, on the other hand, it may be an evident whisper from above, the voice of God Himself striking the alarm in the inner chamber of our souls.

Whichever it be, there is an unwonted waking up of the conscience, whether momentary or lasting. You have felt it, and I have felt it too. I believe that God never leaves any one so entirely alone, but that He does at times strive with him by His Holy Spirit, stirring up serious thoughts within him.

And what a blessing it is, when these lead to that good result which God intends! But it is not always so—far from it. Sometimes a powerful conviction is felt, but there it ends. A person's conscience is pricked, his interest in religion is awakened, his affections are softened, he gives promise of becoming a religious character. But the world steps in, and asserts its mastery; by degrees the heart loses its earnestness, and the spark that was kindled in it dies out. Yes, sometimes

our convictions come to nothing. They render us thoughtful for a moment. They make us unhappy. They bring us perhaps upon our knees. But the feeling passes by, and all is soon forgotten.

But, I say, what a blessing it is when our convictions lead to something real and lasting; when they are the beginning of a new and holier life; when they are acted upon, and carried out to the full extent for which God designed them; when the soul is permanently and effectually won over to Him!

But now I think it will be interesting to inquire by what means these convictions are commonly awakened within us. God uses a variety of instruments, and adopts various ways of working upon our inner man.

Sometimes He works upon us by *Providential Dealings*. It often happens that one in full health and strength lives carelessly. Unmindful of another world, forgetting that

he has a Master in heaven, whom he has pledged himself to serve, almost unconscious that he has a soul to be saved, he lives a mere animal life, caring only for the gains and pleasures of the world. And so he moves on in his smooth, but ruinous, course.

But God, who loves him better than he loves himself, stops him in his career by a fit of illness. And when he is laid by, and lies alone upon his sick bed, solemn thoughts pass through his mind. He feels that he may die, and he is not ready. The past comes before him, and he sees that he has lived to himself, and not to God. Then comes a deep conviction of sin, and an earnest desire, if spared, to live a new life. And this perhaps leads on to real repentance, and he becomes a new creature in Christ.

Or again, God may put forth His chastening hand in another way, and take away from before our eyes some very dear one, in whom our affection is wrapped up. He may thus bring us to sorrow; and so stir

our very souls, and arouse us from our state of indifference.

Or, some heavy trial of a worldly nature may come upon us, some loss in business, or some bitter disappointment. And this may bring us to our senses, and suddenly change our careless life into one of thoughtfulness, our worldliness into a determination to devote ourselves henceforth to the Lord's service.

We have a striking instance of this in the case of King Manasseh. In the midst of his godless career, 'the Lord spake (as we are told) to Manasseh, and to his people; but they would not hear.' Then he tried affliction, and this had a saving effect upon him; 'The Lord brought upon them the captains of the host of the King of Assyria, which took Manasseh among the thorns, and bound him with fetters, and carried him to Babylon. And when he was in affliction, he besought the Lord his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers.'

This, then, was the means which God used to arouse Manasseh from his state of security. And it is a means which He is constantly using to bring conviction home to us.

But God also sometimes sees fit to employ *others* to convince us, as He did in David's case, when He sent Nathan to awaken him from the sleep of sin. If you look at the Thirty-second Psalm, you will see how deep and genuine was his sorrow. He there recounts each stage of his changed history, step by step.


First he describes his utter misery, when he felt his sin, but stifled the sorrow which accompanied it. 'I kept silence,' he says ; 'my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. For day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me : my moisture is turned into the drought of summer.' There was conviction, thorough, heartfelt conviction.

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Next he speaks of Confession, which no doubt gave him instant relief, as it ever will to the true penitent; 'I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord.'

He mentions one step more, and that brought peace; he obtains pardon from God; 'Thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin.' This made him exclaim, as he does in the first verse of the Psalms, 'Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.'

And often does a gracious God adopt the same course with us. He employs *others* to bring us to our senses. A friend, a religious friend, drops a word it may be, which comes with telling power into our hearts. And though our friend may be entirely unconscious of the good he has done, he may be the happy instrument, in God's hands, of awakening us. Or a book may be lent us, with a secret prayer that



it may be useful; and that book may sow the seed of everlasting life in our hearts.

Not unfrequently too a kind word spoken by one whom we have wronged brings conviction to our conscience. St. Peter is a case in point. When he entered the high-priest's house, where his Master was a prisoner, a cowardly feeling of shame came over him, and he disclaimed any connexion whatever with Jesus. Again and again he repeated his denial; and perhaps felt little or no remorse. For a strong desire to escape detection, and thus to secure his own personal safety, seems to have absorbed for the moment all his better feelings. And so he went on, until at length his eye met the Saviour's. It is true that not a word fell from the lips of his Lord. But who can tell how much of reproof, and yet of sorrowful tenderness, there was in that hasty glance? It at once brought conviction. The fallen Apostle came to himself. 'He went out, and wept bitterly.'

The Preaching of God's word too is another means which He delights to employ. That word, though on some it falls lifeless, is in other cases 'quick and powerful, and sharper than a two-edged sword;' it is like 'a hammer, breaking the rock in pieces.' The preacher may have but humble attainments. There may be no commanding intellect apparent, and no 'unusual eloquence, in his sermon; and yet that sermon may startle, persuade, and save.

Read over St. Peter's Sermon, which he preached on the day of Pentecost. There is nothing remarkable in that sermon; but God is pleased to use it for the purpose of rousing a slumbering multitude. As the words fall from the Preacher's lips, they seem to come with a hidden power to the hearts of his audience. One is touched, and then another. The attention of all is riveted. Their conscience is stirred. They are 'pricked in their hearts.' Till at length the whole multitude is carried away; and forgetful of

everything but the overwhelming feeling of the moment, they exclaim, 'Men and brethren, what shall we do?'

Here, again, was conviction in the truest sense.

But sometimes God is pleased to work *without using any means*. The conviction we are speaking of may be produced by the direct act of God. It may be clearly His work, and His only. Thus it was in the case of Saul of Tarsus. And there are doubtless similar instances in the present day. I do not say that we should expect them, or rely too much upon them. But there are instances in which God, by some special and unusual act of grace, turns a man from the path of sin into that of holiness; so that we are forced to say, 'This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes.'

Let me now bring my subject to a close.

Let every reader of these pages ask God to deal faithfully with him. Ask Him to do any thing rather than leave you to yourself. Ask Him to chasten you, if it be needful; to bring affliction, sickness, bereavement, or any other trial; to act the Vinedresser's part, and to cut and prune the vine; to do what He will, so as to bring you to Himself.

And if convictions should force themselves upon you, beware, oh beware, of stifling them by hardening your heart against them. A conviction resisted may never return; and a conviction slighted may have a deadening effect, making you less and less alive to the gracious influences of His Spirit. For as we sometimes see the ground, which has been thawed, and afterwards hardened by the frost, so stiff and unyielding that no work can be done upon it, so those are frequently the most hopeless, who have had some convictions, have obtained some knowledge of the gospel, and have then relapsed into their natural hardheartedness.

Pray against this. And beseech God by His gracious Spirit both to *begin* His work in your heart, so as to make it tender, and also *to carry it on* within you, never leaving you till He has brought you to the Saviour, and firmly established you in the path of holiness.

CHAPTER IV.

CONVERSION.

CONVERSION is the turning of the inner man from sin to God—the change which takes place in a person's mind by the powerful working of grace within him.

I endeavoured to show you in the last chapter what *Conviction* is. It is the waking up of a soul to a sense of what is right, as when it was said of the Prodigal that 'he came to himself.' But *Conversion* is a step beyond. It is the movement of the soul from its former state into a better condition. It was the act of that same Prodigal leaving the far country, and the life of misery that he had led in it, and going back to his Father with a full purpose of amendment.

And is Conversion necessary for *all* per-

sons? Some apparently need it less than others. They have always led, it may be, an outwardly blameless life. They have never fallen into open sin. But even *they* need converting grace, for their hearts, by nature, are turned away from God, and they must be drawn towards Him by the power of the Holy Spirit. The change in such persons may not be very manifest. Their conversion may be so gradual, and so unmarked, that it is hardly noticed, even by themselves ; but still the change takes place, and the work is God's.

In others the change may be more observable. Their previous life may have been so decidedly without God, that any break in that life is very apparent. But in either case the change is real when a person turns to God in earnest, and becomes a faithful and true follower of Christ.

Conversion is described in Scripture under various emblems.

It is likened, for instance, to a *new Birth*.

From the moment that this saving change takes place in anyone, he has a new and altered existence; he begins to lead a new life; he starts afresh, as it were, on his spiritual journey.

It is spoken of as a *new Creation*. 'If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature;' or, as the word in the original signifies, 'a new creation,' so great and so marvellous that it needs nothing less than creative power to effect it.

It has been remarked, that if a harp be broken, the hand of the maker may repair it, and tune the chords again to their old power and sweetness. 'There is hope of a tree (says Job), if it be cut down, that it will sprout again.' But who can restore the shattered crystal, so that the sunbeams shall once more stream through it without finding a flaw? Or who can open again the eyes of a blind person? Who can restore that most precious member when blotted out and decayed by disease or violence?

But still more impossible is it for any but the Creator Himself to restore a broken, fallen, diseased soul. Sin has so cruelly marred it, that none but God Himself has power to repair it. It must be His doing; it is 'a new creation.'

But there is even a stronger expression sometimes used. Conversion is spoken of as *a Passing from death unto life*—as a spiritual *Quickening*, or rising from a state of death. 'You hath God quickened' (says the Apostle to the Christians at Ephesus), 'who were dead in trespasses and sins;' and our Lord declares, 'He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and is passed from death unto life.'

Picture to yourself the condition of Lazarus, when our Lord arrived at the burial-ground in Bethany. His body was lifeless; his whole frame was cold and motionless in death, until Jesus, by His all-powerful word,

raised him from this piteous condition, and gave him new life.

And such is the sinner's state by nature. He is weak and powerless ; he has no feeling for spiritual things ; he is asleep ; he is diseased ; aye, and more than all this, he is dead. God's minister speaks to him ; he does not heed his voice. Loud calls come to him from above ; they make no impression ; he hears with the ear, but not with the soul within. And so he goes on in this miserable condition, till at length, perhaps, God puts forth His almighty power, and the soul wakes up and lives. And what is this but a spiritual resurrection, a rising from the dead, a living unto God ?

Or, to illustrate still further this great truth, let me call your attention to the scene which meets our eye in Ezekiel, xxxvii. The prophet is suddenly borne aloft, and carried in a vision to a lonely valley ; and there he beholds something that resembles a huge battle-field, all strewed with bones,

white and dry. As the prophet gazes around him ; there is not a sign, nor a sound of life. Presently a voice comes to him, 'Son of man, can these bones live?' He is then desired to preach to the lifeless skeletons, and offer prayer for them. And forthwith there comes from heaven a living, life-giving breath, and the dry bones come together, and are changed into living men.

And so when the Christian looks upon those around him who are living without God in the world, it makes him sad, and well-nigh fills him with despair. Unbelief whispers, 'Can these bones live?' Yes, they can ; and we should exert ourselves in their behalf. We should pray for them. And who shall say that they are beyond the reach of grace? Is not God able to quicken them, so that they shall become living souls—a seed to serve Him? And shall we not one day rejoice perhaps over the wondrous change, and say, 'This my son was dead, and is alive again?'

I said just now that Conversion was necessary for us all, without one exception. Let me give you my reasons.

First, *Scripture* speaks of it as necessary. Our Lord's language was, 'Ye must be born again ;' and He also says, 'Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.' And the tenor of the Apostles' preaching was, 'Repent ye therefore, and be converted.'

Secondly, there are many things *in Nature* which seem to intimate it. What wonderful changes do we daily see around us ! They are ever going on.

How marvellous, for instance, and how complete, the transition from night to day—from winter to summer ! We pass by a tree in its apparently dead and frozen state ; and we look upon the same tree, when the warmth of spring clothes it with leaves, and it is totally changed. We observe a stone, sleeping, as it were, in its native quarry, utterly *rough and shapeless* ; and we see the same

stone, after the mason has carved and chiselled it, has polished and beautified it, forming the architrave of some stately pillar. How complete the change !

Or watch that loathsome insect moving slowly and awkwardly along the ground, and feeding as it goes on the coarsest fare. Then mark what a wondrous change is presently wrought in it, and how marvellously and instantly it accommodates itself to that change. The crawling caterpillar becomes a winged and gorgeous butterfly ; and with the putting off of its old skin, it divests itself of old habits and instincts. It now spurns the ground, and flies joyously through the sunny air, and feeds on the honied nectar of the flowers around it. The change within corresponds with the change without.

I might mention other, and even greater, changes in the outer world. And all these seem to shadow forth that still mightier change which is wrought in man's spiritual frame by the grace of God.

A third reason why the change is needed for us all is that without it *we cannot heartily serve God*. We may serve Him from fear or from the mere force of conscience ; but such a service will be unnatural and constrained ; it will be the service of a slave and not of a freeman. But when the heart of stone is taken away, and a new heart is given, when the whole nature and character are altered, when the man becomes a new creature in Christ, then is God's service perfect freedom ; it becomes the service of a willing, loving heart.

Lastly, to an unchanged person *Heaven itself would be no heaven*. Were it possible for a sinner in his unrenewed state to enter that blissful world, he would not be happy there. The holy atmosphere would not suit him. The employment there would not be congenial to him. The companionship would be distasteful. It is true that heaven has been prepared for us by the Son of God Himself ; but it is equally true that we must

be prepared for heaven, or we can never dwell there. We must be moulded and fashioned according to the divine image.

I might go on, and speak to you of the process by which the heart becomes moulded into its new form. And again, I might enter upon the difficult question, which has given rise to so much discussion, as to whether a soul which has been really converted can relapse again into its former state of deadness. But I must pass by these questions, and bring my chapter to a close.

You see then how vitally important it is that this change should have been wrought in us. It matters not *how*, or *when*, or *where* we received our first impressions ; but it does matter that we are now living under the influence of divine grace. It is of infinite importance that our hearts should at this moment be savingly impressed with the reality of religion. Are we new creatures in

Christ? Have old things passed away, and all things become new to us?

And remember, the change that I have been speaking of is not a mere superficial change, but an entire inward change of the whole man. It is a change great in its character, and lasting in its consequences—a change which affects not the habits only, but the heart—a change that both reaches downwards into the depths of the soul, and forward into the ages of eternity.

CHAPTER V.

SELF-EXAMINATION.*

SELF-EXAMINATION is one of those duties which the present solemn season seems to force upon us.

And why is this duty needful? It is because naturally we are especially ignorant of ourselves; and because this self-ignorance is oftentimes our ruin.* But how strange that we should be thus ignorant of so close an inmate as ourselves! What would you think of a man, who had for years harboured under his roof a guest, whose face he had never

* Much that is contained in this chapter is suggested by the remarks of Dean Goulburn and Dr. Caird. Sundry passages are quoted from these authors.

seen—a constant inmate of his house, who was all the while unknown to him. And yet with some of us there has been present, not only beneath our roof, but within our breast, a mysterious resident, an inseparable companion, nearer to us than friend or brother, and yet of whom after all we know little or nothing.

Again, we sometimes reproach those of our countrymen who have travelled far, and seen many distant lands, whilst they are content to remain comparatively unacquainted with their own. But this folly is pardonable, compared with that of the man who is looking here and there for information, whilst there is a little world within his own breast still unexplored. But so it is. We know more—often far more—about others, than about ourselves.

And again, we are much better acquainted with the state of our *bodies* than of our *souls*. Bodily health shows itself unmistakably, by the ruddy countenance, the strength of

limbs, the vigour and activity of the whole frame. Disease, on the other hand, speedily manifests its presence by pain, or by the paleness of the skin, or the irregular beating of the pulse. The sick man soon finds out that something is wrong, and longs to have it removed. But not so with our spiritual health. Many of us know but very little of our *inner* state. Our actual condition in God's sight is a matter which we are content to leave uncertain.

And why are we so backward in this self-knowledge? One reason is that we are afraid to prove our own hearts. It is not so with our *worldly* concerns. If there is a leakage in our house, we lose not a moment to find out where the water enters; we spare no pains to discover the faulty tile, or the broken window. If anything is wrong in our farm or our garden, we are not indifferent about it; but we do our best to ascertain the cause. If the seed is amiss, we procure better. Or we make a change

in the tillage of the soil; or we manure it differently.

At all events, we do not ignore the evil; but instantly take steps to discover its magnitude, and to prevent its recurrence. And yet when the character and happiness of the soul for time and eternity are concerned, the almost universal endeavour is, not to look the danger in the face, and provide against it, but to evade or forget the painful symptoms.

But though we may refuse to know ourselves, 'crying peace, when there is no peace,' we are often far from happy in our forgetfulness. There is an inward misgiving, a consciousness that all is not right. Our brightest hours are often overshadowed by a vague sense of coming danger. There is a feverish unreality in all our joys; and our nearest approach to happiness is but after all like the wretched enjoyments of the poor spendthrift, who revels on for a little hour, rather than be at the pains to examine

into his embarrassed affairs ; or as the hapless wretch in the sinking ship, who drives away by intoxication the sense of danger, but only thereby unfits himself the more to encounter its reality.

Then, another cause of our self-ignorance is, that our sins steal upon us *so very gradually*, that we mark not their growth. We all know by what slow and minute degrees changes occur in our bodily frame, and therefore we hardly perceive them. How imperceptibly do life's advancing stages steal upon us ! If we leapt *at once* from boyhood into manhood, or if we layed down at night with the consciousness of youthful bloom and vigour; and then waked up in the morning to find ourselves grey-haired, worn, and withered, the change could not be mistaken by us. But instead of this, to-day we are much the same as we were yesterday. When we reach the turning-point, the descent is so gradual ; the lines on our faces deepen so slowly ; old associates are broken up, not

suddenly, but one by one—unwound as it were thread by thread; old forms and familiar faces are not swept away all at once by some sudden catastrophe, but only drop out of sight one after another. Hence it is that we think but little of life's decline; and almost unawares we find ourselves perhaps not far from its close.

And so, alas! it may be, and often is, with our inner man. Our spiritual state may be declining, our soul may be suffering loss, almost without our knowing it. There is a decay of the soul—a spiritual decrepitude and death, to which many are advancing, and at which many have already arrived; and yet they are unconscious of it; it has come upon them so slowly. Sin creeps in—the world gains a footing—bad habits fasten upon us—the fresh feelings of conversion die out—our first love cools within us—our hearts grow torpid and lifeless—and we suddenly find ourselves drifting far from the point we once aimed at. And

well is it if we have not drifted so far, that our return is beyond hope.

I will mention yet another reason why our spiritual state is often so hidden from us. The tendency of sin is to *deadens the conscience*, till by degrees we actually know not of its existence. It brings a shudder over us at first, but its repulsiveness rapidly wears off. The sin, which would once have shocked us, becomes so familiar to us, so entirely a part of ourselves, that we hardly know that it is there. Ah, there are sins which lie embedded and rankling in our hearts, causing us much uneasiness, and hindering us in our approaches to God — sins which mar our course, and may eventually exclude us from God for ever. And these are perhaps the most dangerous of all.

Who hides a sin is like the hunter, who
Once warmed a frozen adder with his breath ;
And when he placed it near his heart it flew,
With poisoned fangs, and stung that heart to death.

But if we know not the existence of such sins, how dangerous is this self-ignorance! Of all evils a secret evil is most to be dreaded; of all enemies a concealed enemy is the worst. Better the open precipice than the hidden pitfall; better the *tortures* of a severe disease than the painlessness of mortification. And so, whatever be our soul's guilt and danger, it is better to be aware of it. However alarming and distressing self-knowledge may be, it is better than the tremendous evil of self-ignorance.

You see then how needful is Self-examination, to unveil the heart and lay it bare, to discover what its real state is—not in man's sight, but in God's sight, whose eye pierces through every concealment, and looks into every corner.

Now we must bear in mind that there are two kinds of Self-examination.

There is a sort of self-examination which


is *ever going on* with a true Christian. In our daily actions, even our commonest actions, we should get into the habit of sounding our motives. If we do any work of charity, for instance, or an act of devotion, we should see that we have a right object in view, and that we are doing it from a right principle. And this taking of ourselves to task, this passing judgment on ourselves, should become a constant habit with us ; and we should be always exercising it, though almost unconsciously.

But besides this, and in addition to it, we should at *special* times summon ourselves to the bar of our own conscience in a more direct and formal manner.

Some persons are in the habit of examining themselves *daily*. They put themselves through a sort of searching process before kneeling down each day for morning or evening prayer. If this be done carefully, watchfully, and devoutly, one can imagine

great good to arise from it ; but there is a danger of its becoming a formal and not a spiritual exercise. With self-examination, as well as with prayer, it is easy — fatally easy — to allow the process to be drawn down from its high and spiritual aim to the level of a form. A string of questions put to the conscience every night, never varying with the circumstances of the day, turning principally upon outward conduct and answered almost mechanically — this is what the self-examination of many reduces itself to. We must therefore remember that it may be gone through with little or no real sounding of the heart.

Others, again, enter upon this examination, not daily, but *periodically* ; they resort to it once or twice in the week, or at particular seasons, such as the six weeks of Lent. And perhaps this is as much as I would recommend, especially for a beginner, lest an exercise so very profitable in itself should



become burdensome and intolerable. If such an occasional examination were carried out honestly and thoroughly, I feel that it would be more useful than if adopted oftener, but with less reality. I need not say that there are many books in which heads for such examination may be easily found, which would be suitable to our particular requirements.

The great object of self-examination is to discover and pull out from their hiding-place our more palpable sins and infirmities; but even these are often so glossed over and hidden from our view, that we are for the time hardly conscious of their existence within us.

The two cases which I before mentioned, when speaking of Conviction, will serve to illustrate this remarkable unconsciousness of the existence of sin—the cases of St. Peter and of David.

St. Peter fancied that he was so entirely devoted to his Lord that there was not the smallest fear of his ever yielding to temptation. 'Such,' thought he, 'can never be my case. Though I die with Thee, yet will I not *deny* Thee. This sin, of all others, I am least likely to give way to.'

David is another example of the same thing. The prophet describes the very sin, though under another name, which had taken possession of his soul. But David sees it not. Nay, he loudly condemns the sin, unconscious that he himself is the guilty perpetrator of it. And it is not until Nathan holds the mirror before him, and points to his likeness, telling him plainly, 'Thou art the man,' that his eyes are opened, and he is led to exclaim in the agony of true penitence, 'I have sinned against the Lord.'

But it is not only great sins that we must

take account of—those grosser and more glaring transgressions, which we have only to discover, and a verdict against them is instantly given, and the heart at once pleads guilty. But there are *lesser* sins, of which the world takes no note, but calls them trifling—such as omissions of private prayer, or carelessness and haste in the exercise of it; little acts of dishonesty in trade; falsehoods which have slipped from us in the ordinary intercourse of life; allusions in conversation, which were calculated to injure and mislead others; impure thoughts and unholy desires; envious and unkind feelings, which have been fondled and nurtured in the secret chambers of the heart—these and other faults, which we should shrink from discovering to our fellow-men, lest that by making them known we should be lowered in their esteem—it is very needful to put our finger upon these, and so note their existence, that we may have no rest until we have brought them, one and all,

to the cross, to be nailed and fastened there.

But even further, the probe of Self-examination should be applied to the *better* parts of our conduct. When our actions are good in themselves, the motives which suggested them should be carefully called in question; for an unsound motive may underlie the fairest conduct. We should try and discriminate what is hollow and spurious from what is genuine and true. Our very acts of devotion should be looked into, and our deeds of charity; lest the one should be performed mechanically, and the other with a desire to please self, or to be approved of men. For, alas! how much there is that *looks* well; but it is deceptive, and even wrong, when tried by the touchstone of God's word; for there may be in reality no love for Christ's service, and no desire for God's glory actuating us.

I trust that nothing which I have now said may dishearten any one. Our hearts are very deceptive and untrue; and it is well to know them—nay, this knowledge is absolutely necessary. Our sins lie often-times closely concealed; and it is well to bring them forth to the light.

But there are two points, which I would leave with you for your comfort.

Remember we have to deal with a Being who tenderly loves us, who knows our infirmities, and is not extreme to mark all that is amiss, if we honestly desire to do His will. This thought should encourage us, and make us hopeful. For if our heartfelt purpose is to do God's will, He will help us, and will make allowance for our many infirmities. There may be mixed motives in much that we do; and yet the right may predominate, and the wrong may be hated, though it may steal in, in spite of our watchfulness. There was but One, whose heart *always* beat true to

God's glory and man's welfare. In Him the magnetic needle ever pointed to the pole, and was never shaken for a moment from its steadfastness. *His* singleness of aim and unswerving rectitude cannot be perfectly *attained* by us, though it may be imitated. By God's grace we may follow the Saviour, though at a distance. And thank God, the nearer we approach Him, the happier and more blessed will be our course.

The other thought, and a very precious one, which I would leave with you, is this—when, after much inward searching, we have detected our sins, our shortcomings, our failings, though the discovery may alarm us and make us sad (and oh, ought it not to make us very sad?), yet we need not sink down in despair. We need not give ourselves up for lost. No soul is beyond the reach of remedy. There is an Almighty Healer. There is balm in Gilead. There is a Physician there. No case is beyond

His power. No soul is so far gone in sin, as to baffle His skill. Open your whole heart to Jesus. Tell Him all your case. Confess at His feet every hidden grief, every secret sorrow, every untold sin. He is ready to hear and to help. He is able to save to the uttermost all that come unto God by Him. His blood is a universal cleanser.

CHAPTER VI.

PRAYER.

I SAID in my opening chapter that one principal duty to which our Church calls us in the season of Lent is to special earnestness in Prayer.

By Prayer I mean, not the cold, formal routine of repeating in private certain devout and solemn words upon our knees, or of coming to the House of God and listening, however attentively, to that beautiful form of prayer prescribed for us by our Church. Prayer is something much deeper and more real than this, something that comes from our very hearts, the speaking of the inner man to God. Prayer has been described as 'human need craving the divine fulness;' as

‘the wretchedness of earth’ begging the consolations of heaven;’ as ‘the helplessness of the creature clinging to the strength of the Creator;’ as ‘the voice from nature’s wound calling to the heavenly Healer;’ as ‘the heart’s message going up to heaven.’

It was said, you know, of Saul—of the awakened, the penitent, the spiritually enlightened Saul—‘Behold he prayeth.’ And this too will be said of us, if the same searching change has been wrought within us, if we too have passed from death unto life; if we are indeed born from above. Our new breath will be prayer; our new life will show itself by an earnest cry to heaven.

What have your prayers been in the past? What were they this morning, when you rose from your bed and made your preparation for the duties of the day? How few among us can look up and say, ‘Lord, Thou knowest that I have approached Thee, and drawn very near to Thy throne. I have poured out my heart before Thee. I have told Thee of my

sins and my wants. I have implored Thy pardon and Thy blessing, both for myself and for others. I have lifted up my voice in heartfelt thankfulness for Thine abundant mercies.'

How few can say that this has been the case! Would not most of us, if we spoke truly, have to own to a sad coldness and deadness in prayer; to the lifting up of the voice without the heart; to the repetition of solemn words, with which our feelings have not corresponded; to the wanderings, the painful wanderings of our thoughts, ready to fix themselves on any trifle rather than on Him who seeth in secret?

And why do I speak thus? Because I want you to see, and to be convinced of, your miserable defects; and I want you to stir yourself up forthwith to something which deserves the name of prayer.

I shall confine myself almost entirely to private prayer. And I will enter into a few particulars.

First, let us inquire *what Prayer consists of*,—


1. *Confession* is a very important feature in it. But it is not enough once for all to acknowledge our guilt, and to seek for its removal. Neither, again, is it enough to make our confession in a general way, as we do time after time in the house of God. It must needs be so in public worship, for the confessions of a congregation must have something general and comprehensive about them. But in private, when alone with God, we must try to put our finger upon our individual sins, and bring them forth one by one to Him, asking Him to give us grace to overcome them.

But it may be asked, is it necessary for one who has received pardon to go on confessing his sins? Yes, this is still needful. For who among us has not the acknowledgment to make each day of fresh sins committed, and fresh deficiencies showing themselves? As in winter we may have the bank of snow

cleared away from before our door, but is there not day by day a fresh drift accumulating, which also needs to be removed? Again and again the believer must go and acknowledge his transgressions, his daily failings, his constant departures from that rule which he so much desires to follow. And constantly he must have recourse to the fountain opened for sin and for uncleanness.

2. Then, next, there must be direct *Application* to God that He will give us what we need; whether it be the pardon of our sins, or fresh strength to enable us to fight against them; whether it be some worldly blessing, or some spiritual gift. We should consider what we want, and ask God to give us out of His fulness. And if He sees that it will be good for us, we may be assured that He will grant our request, and give us what we ask for.

If we would pray well, says a Christian writer, we must have *something to pray for*.



We must know our wants, feel our wants, express our wants. We must have a direct errand at the Throne of Grace. Oh, how shallow our prayers often are ! But this will give a depth and a reality to them.

3. But Prayer is not made up of mere petition. There should be also connected with it an act of *Adoration*, which we should render to God. When an earthly Sovereign receives his subjects, they are not content merely to present their petitions to him, but they also pay him homage. They do him reverence, and declare their faithful and devoted allegiance to him. And there should be something of this kind in our everyday worship. Indeed the word 'worship,' in its olden meaning, signifies this very act which I am trying to describe. Thus it is said that king Nebuchadnezzar *worshipped* Daniel, or paid him reverence. And in the same sense the word is used in our marriage service. In like manner, we should give to God our worship

or homage. We should bow before Him, acknowledging His greatness, humbling ourselves in His sacred presence, and rendering to Him the honour which is due. There should be more of this perhaps in our public than in our private prayers, but still there should be something of it in our daily approach to the King of Kings. We should try to honour God by the expression of our lips, and the adoration of our hearts. This will give a breadth and grandeur to our prayers, and rob them of their narrow selfishness.

4. *Intercession* too should not be wanting in our prayers. It is very good for us to think of others, to consider their wants, their trials, and their difficulties, and bear them on our hearts before the Throne of Grace. I am afraid that the devotions of most of us are lacking in this feature. We feel deeply our own struggles, and forget that others are engaged in the same difficult warfare, and need our

prayers. We should pray, not merely as individuals, but as members of a Christian family. And, above all, we should remember that our Lord, in that pattern prayer which He has given us, bids us use the words 'us,' and 'our,' as if to remind us that 'we ~~are~~ members one of another.'

There are few things which tend more to enlarge our hearts, and to bring a blessing on our own souls, than this work of Intercession. Try it, especially at this sacred season, and you will find it both good for yourself, and it will call down a blessing on others.

5. There is one more thing connected with Prayer which I must not omit: and yet it is not, strictly speaking, a part of Prayer. I mean *Praise* or *Thanksgiving*. I will not dwell on this; but merely remind you that Praise is ever going on in heaven; and here, too all around us, nature seems to send up its thankful voice to God. And shall not we, who have so much to be grateful for,

take part in the chorus? If our blessings have been won by prayer, they ought to be worn with thankfulness, and acknowledged in praises.

Having then considered what Prayer consists of, let me now endeavour to meet two or three difficulties with reference to it.

Our chief difficulty, I think, lies in the fact that *we address an unseen God*. If I have a favour to ask of a fellow-creature, it is easy enough to go to him, and present my request to him. Or if I have wronged a neighbour, there is no difficulty in asking his forgiveness. But when I have wants to make known to God, or when I feel that I have wronged Him, it requires real faith to go into my room, and address one who is altogether invisible. Our words often seem to be lost in the air, instead of reaching the ear of God. Our attention flags; our mind wanders; and our devotion becomes a mere lip-service.

The Roman Catholics feel this, and apply a remedy. Would that it were a legitimate one! But what is it? They place before the worshipper something that he can see—an image, or a crucifix, or a picture—not bidding him to pray to that object, but to use it as a means of helping him in his prayer to God.

This is a species of idolatry. For what does the word *idolatry* mean? It is composed of two Greek words which signify the *worship of something seen*. But this is clearly condemned by the word of God, which tells us that ‘God is a spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth.’

Yes, the worshipping an unseen one is doubtless a great difficulty, for it needs the exercise of faith every time we kneel before God. But I think I may make a suggestion or two which will perhaps help you.

Instead of feeling that you are going to speak to a distant Stranger inhabiting un-

limited space, say to yourself, 'I am drawing near to my Father, my Father who loves me, my Father who is close to me, my Father who is more ready to give than I am to ask.' This will give you a definite idea of the Person whom you address.

There should be a feeling of sacred familiarity in our prayers; and at the same time the deepest reverence. We should approach God as a Friend, and yet as one infinitely great and holy. Prayer should be an act of trust, of love, and of friendship. There should be a direct intercourse between our souls and our almighty heavenly Friend. We should converse with Him whom our souls love. And who can tell the blessedness of such acts of friendship, bringing us into closer communion with God?

Occasionally too it is well to direct your prayers to Jesus your Saviour. If He were still on earth, you would gladly go to Him, spread your case before Him, and ask Him

for this or that blessing. And is He not just as able now to hear and answer prayer, and just as ready to stoop down and receive us, as He was in the days of His abode among us?

Or we may pray to the Holy Spirit, for He is very God. We may ask Him to quicken our cold hearts, to convince us of sin, to reveal Christ to us, to breathe His own calm, peaceful influence upon our souls, to make us holy in heart and life.

And since the Holy Spirit is said to help our infirmities in prayer, we should specially apply for His assistance, asking Him to strengthen us, and to teach us how to pray. St. Jude speaks of 'praying in the Holy Ghost,' by which he means praying with His direct aid. And I believe, if we prepared ourselves more for our acts of devotion—if we laid ourselves open for the Spirit's influence—prayer would not be to us the cold, lifeless, unmeaning thing that it too often is. When upon your knees then

let your first act be to implore the Holy Spirit to guide, to quicken, and to tune your heart for the work of prayer. And when thus prepared, that work will indeed be delightful.

Our prayers should be generally addressed to the Father, in the all-prevailing name of Jesus our Mediator; and in order to pray rightly, we should seek the gracious help of the Holy Spirit. But occasionally we shall find it desirable to make our direct address to either of the Three Persons in the Holy Trinity.

Secondly, the question is sometimes asked, if it be right to *pray for temporal blessings*. I think it is right, so long as we ask for things which are not forbidden; and so long as we ask for them with the proviso, *if they be in accordance with God's will*. Then I think we are free to ask for anything, be it small or great, which seems likely to advance our happiness.

Thirdly, some people are a little perplexed with the question, whether it is desirable to use *a written form, or our own words*. On this point I would merely say, that it matters little; for if the heart be in our prayers, either the one or the other will be an offering acceptable to God; and if the heart be absent, then are they both utterly worthless.

A fourth difficulty which often exercises us, is that we feel at times *in no mood for prayer*. What then? Should we give way to the feeling, and wait till our minds are more in harmony with so spiritual a work? Surely not. For this would be giving place to the devil. This would be both robbing ourselves of the blessing which God has perhaps in store for us, and be robbing Him of the incense which He is pleased to accept from us. We should rather entreat God to give us 'the Spirit of grace and of supplications,' to release us from the net by

which we are held, and to cut away the cords which bind us down to earth, so that our souls may mount upwards.

A good man has said, 'When you cannot pray as you *ought*, pray as you *can*.' And truly we shall not long wait on the Lord without having our strength renewed. For although prayer does not always seem to open the gate of heaven, we may be sure that God loves to see us, amidst all discouragements, clinging close to Him. And who can tell that prayer made to Him under such trying circumstances may not prove to be the best and most acceptable offering which we can make to God?

Lastly, we are sometimes *pressed and hurried*, and we are thus tempted to curtail the time usually allotted to our prayers. This is a favourite temptation of the evil one; and, alas! it is often too successful. We should specially guard against it. What! could ye not watch with me one hour?

Can you spare time for the world, and not for your Lord? Is He to be put aside, and the world to be allowed precedence?

Never give way to religious hurry. Allot a sufficient time to your devotions, even if you must rob the world to do so. Our Lord's words seem to express deliberation, 'Enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut the door.' In the midst of our occupations, we should deliberately set apart some time for God. In fact the more of worldly business we have to transact, the more need we have to arm ourselves against a spirit of worldliness by earnest and devout waiting upon Him.

I am sure that our great fault is, that we are not enough apart with God. We live too much in the world, too much with others, not enough with our Lord. And the consequence is, that to many of us He is an utter stranger; and to all of us more strange than He ought to be.

If we wish to live with God in the world,

and to find joy and comfort in His work, we must be much alone with Him, and hold communion with Him in the calm and peaceful enjoyment of prayer.

CHAPTER VII.

LIVING UNTO GOD.

TO live unto God, a holy and devoted life—this is the great object that our Church has in pressing upon us the observance of Lent. And this has been my object—my chief object—may I not say my sole object, in these pages. And if I have induced even one of my readers to see the misery of a sinful or of a worldly life, and to pant after a more entire dedication of himself to God, I shall indeed feel that I have not written in vain.

To this end I have shown you *what Sin is*. I have spoken to you of *Conviction* of sin, and of *Conversion* from it, urging you to seek at once the life-giving influence of the

Holy Spirit. I have mentioned many Helps, and those especially which this season suggests, viz. *Fasting, Prayer, and Self-examination*. And now, I earnestly ask of God that He would show us the duty and the happiness of living no longer unto ourselves, but unto Christ our Lord, 'unto Him who died for us, and rose again.'

To live unto *ourselves* is the natural bent and inclination of our fallen nature. To live unto *the world* is our great temptation. To live for *others* is however a higher step. But even this comes short of what God requires of us, namely, to live *unto the Lord*. And this is the highest life which man can lead.

For what is life? In the estimation of many it consists in the possession of health, and in the exercise of those bodily powers with which God has blest us. But this is not life in its best sense. For this is only the portion of *some*; it only lasts too for a *little while*; and it is subject to constant *fluctuations*.

Others look upon life as the full enjoyment of varied pleasures. They are gay and happy, although not so happy as they *seem* to be, or as they themselves *expect* to be; for of worldly pleasures it may be said, they are 'as the crackling of thorns under a pot.' They make a blaze, but leave behind no solid comfort.

Again, one would think, to judge by the eagerness with which men pursue wealth, that to gain that would be life. It brings us no doubt possessions which are important. But still this is not life, in the true sense of the word. We may gain the whole world, and yet lose our souls. And does not our Lord assure us that 'a man's life consisteth not in the things which he possesseth?'

Life is something higher, deeper, richer, than this. Life consists, not in what we *have*, but in what we *are*. It is a hidden thing, hid with Christ in God. 'He that hath the Son hath life.' 'To me to live,' truly to live, 'is Christ.'

Now, every man naturally lives unto himself. And yet there is a sense in which St. Paul says truly, 'None of us liveth to himself,' by which he means that our lives have their influence upon others, and that we are accountable to God for all our doings.

It is a stirring thought that for every deed a person does, for every step he takes, and for every word he speaks, he is responsible to God. It has been remarked that it is not so with the rest of creation. A *River*, for instance, flows on in its course; but whether that course be straight or crooked, it receives neither blame nor praise. A *Tree* may wither and bear no fruit; but we charge it with no crime. So it is with the numberless *Animals* around us. They are either harmless or destructive, but we do not on that account either commend them or condemn them.

But it is altogether different with man. He is a responsible being, accountable to God *for all* he does. He has a Master above

him, and to that Master he standeth or falleth.


This, I say, is a very striking thought, and it ought to startle some of us. What! have I been twenty, or thirty, or forty years in this world, and has every deed of mine been noticed, and carefully looked into, by One above? Must I indeed answer at God's bar for every single action of my past life, and for every word that has passed through my lips, and for every thought too and feeling that have been allowed to lodge within my mind?

Yes, so it is; for 'none of us liveth to himself.' A thing may be often done very quickly, and without much thought; but there it goes instantly into God's balance to be weighed and judged by Him who is a righteous God. A word is spoken in a moment without consideration; our lips have uttered it, and it cannot be recalled. But perhaps that word was a wrong word: it may have done harm to a fellow-creature, or

it may have been offensive to God. Oh remember, that word *is* registered in heaven. God heard it ; and it may one day come forth as a witness against us. A thought has been lying in our minds for hours and days together ; or a desire, which we ought to have driven away at once, for we felt it to be a wrong one, and that it was injuring our souls. No one knew of its existence but ourselves ; and yet there was one eye that read it. He, from whom no secrets are hid, noted it down in the Book of His remembrance.

So then you see what the Apostle meant, when he declared that 'none of us liveth to himself.'

And yet in another sense how many are thus living to themselves—not a vicious life perhaps, but still a selfish life, a life without God. We live as if we were our own property, and had no Master to whom we were accountable. Self is the chief object with *us*—self-aggrandisement or self-indulgence.



Self is the one we desire to please. Self is the point around which everything clusters.


But how different, how totally different, is this from the life which I am setting before you. The true Christian's is a changed life. It is not the mere acceptance of certain truths ; or the transition from a state of indifference to a little more thoughtfulness ; or the giving up of bad ways, and entering upon a somewhat more regular course ; but it is an altogether new life, a change in the whole man. Our language should be, ' whether we live, we live unto the Lord ; or whether we die, we die unto the Lord : whether we live therefore or die, we are the Lord's.' We should live with God ever before our eyes, realising His presence, and pressing towards heaven. We should live in this world, but as belonging to another.

Now, this living unto the Lord is not a fitful, occasional thing. It is not a life that we need only live at times, but always. And

here is the great difficulty. It is easy to be religious on special occasions—now and then to say our prayers—to sit down and read the Bible at stated times—to talk seriously on a Sunday, or when near a dying bed. But real religion is something more than this: it is something that fills the whole heart, and rules the whole life, and runs through the whole character.

Sometimes, when we have been listening to God's word, and our hearts have been warmed by what we have heard, and our souls have glowed within us, have we not felt the great difficulty of carrying out these feelings, when we plunge again into the cold atmosphere of the outer world? Are we not apt to get chilled, and lose our warmth and fervour? We seem like a lamp, which burns steadily enough within doors, but is soon blown out, when exposed and unsheltered from the wind.

And truly all this shows that what we *need is to have our hearts leavened with*



religion. It must have a deep and abiding root within us, or it will not be proof against the world. It should be like a vein of precious gold running through our whole characters and our whole lives, mingling with all we do, enriching it, and making it acceptable in God's sight. It should show itself in our griefs and in our gladness, in our toils and in our rests, amidst all the occupations and engagements of this busy life.

Let me now offer you a caution or two.

Do not suppose that this living unto Him who died for us, this devotedness to our Lord, is suitable for some and not for others ; or that some are more especially called to it, such as the Ministers of Christ, sick persons, or those who happen to be so placed as to have little to call them away from such a life. The life I am speaking of is suitable to *all*. Depend upon it, we are all called to it. There can be no heaven for any of

us without it. We do not need to be laid aside from the ordinary intercourse of men. Our place is in the world, and there we must practise it.

What a false idea it is to suppose that a young man, for instance, in full health, cannot thus live unto God—that he has other avocations which are wholly unsuited to a really religious life. If he has such avocations, then they must be unlawful for a Christian, and the sooner he puts them aside the better; for nothing can supersede this calling of God. It is in the midst of his health and strength that God loves to be served. Do not fall into the mistake of supposing that the man of business, the tradesman, or the working man, has little time for such a religious life as this. He may be always serving God, even amidst his busiest occupations. His eye may be ever turned towards his Lord in every circumstance of life. You might as well say that the Sailor has no time to learn his duty *amidst the winds and storms*? Why, these

are the very things to teach him and to make him a good sailor. Does the Soldier, who is constantly fighting, tell us that he has no leisure to acquire the art of war? Surely it is in the toils and dangers of the battlefield that he will learn best to fight. And I am very sure that there is no better school in which we may learn to serve God than amidst the duties and trials of this rough and dangerous world.

Again, it may be said that if we thus lived unto God, the machinery of the world would come to a stand-still, it could not go on. I believe that it would in no way interfere with it. It would not impede, but it would sweeten and lighten, all the occupations of life. Can we not, even in our busiest moments, think much and often about some absent friend, and yet fully discharge our daily allotted task in the world? Can we not look forward to the time when we shall be released from our toil, without its spoiling our work? Nay, would not our heart be cheered by

dwelling on these happy subjects? Would they not act as a secret oil, to smooth the wheels of labour? And why should not the highest of all hopes and joys have the same powerful effect? If our religion is real, is there no bright prospect before us, no home of rest, no loving hearts waiting to welcome us, when our toilsome day of life is ended?

You may not be able to understand how such hopes and feelings can have a place in the Christian's heart. You perhaps feel them not yourself, and you think it strange that they can exist in the hearts of others. No, the strange thing is that we who profess to be Christian people, and to be on our way to heaven, have not more of these hopes and feelings—that amidst our toils and burdens here we do not oftener think—nay, that we ever for an instant allow ourselves to forget—our Home and our Friend above!

The truth is, we have lived, many of us, too long to ourselves; let us henceforth live unto Him who died for us. Our remaining time is

short; let that time be given to Him. Let us remember that we have a Master; and for that Master we should live, and in that Master's service it is not too much that our whole life should be devoted.

It is a happy thing when we cease from pursuing our own ends, and doing our own works, and yield ourselves up to do those of our Lord—when we can say, 'To me to live is Christ!' To possess Him is our greatest treasure. To receive Him into our souls is the best of all possessions. To labour for Him, and to serve Him with a loving heart, is our truest happiness.

The six weeks of Lent will soon be over. And remember that the closing week is the most solemn week of all, when the thick clouds were blackening, and the first mutterings of thunder were heard in the distance, and the storm was gathering, ready to fall on that sacred head, which at length bowed beneath its violence. Let this be with you a

very holy week, a week of specially solemn thought and prayer, a week to draw you nearer to the cross, and to prepare you for our Easter glory and our Easter joy, which are so soon to follow.

I cannot close this book without saying how much comfort I have felt in preparing it. And now, whilst I ask of God to pardon all ~~the~~ that I have omitted to say, and all that I have said wrongly, I beseech Him, by the power of His Holy Spirit, to fasten some thoughts upon your minds which may bring forth the fruit of a holy and devoted life.

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